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# I am the Sphinx

By Maggie Butt

*Based on a true story, told by a prisoner of  
Straflager E166.*

Snakeskin 2008



A doorway is a hopeless hiding place  
and the sweet smell of love  
like aniseed to tracker dogs  
who growl and snap our feet.  
Blacked-out tenements crowd  
this labyrinth of unfamiliar streets,  
too dark to see the scuffling rats.  
Night in this town of sounds:  
our two sets of running feet,  
the panting of our breath  
barking dogs and hunters yells  
echo off buildings, closing for the kill.  
Shivering listeners cower behind each window  
and their prayers fail to cloak us.

We squeeze each other's hands  
Bill says, "I love you,"  
but capture's searchlight blinds my face  
and my reply is prisoned.  
I clamp my chattering teeth and  
trembling finds new home in my knees.  
German voices ring behind the light  
- disembodied shout, "Against the wall!"  
I lean to stop myself from falling,  
a loose-stringed puppet.  
I will not sob. It will not end this way.

I cough my voice down low to give  
false rank and serial number  
deforming my Czech vowels.

Marching to the prison camp  
I keep my eyes fixed far ahead.  
As men piss against trees  
steam rising in the chilly air  
I sew my bladder tight.  
The camp wall's wire looks flimsy  
inadequate, until I see the guns.  
I bite my tongue, hope "Hail Mary"  
will contain the fear, prevent it  
bubbling, hot-spring, from my lips.  
Words swirl within my head  
trapped blizzard in a snow-globe.

The British officer, as young as us,  
conducts a tour which includes the latrines  
"Not quite the Ritz," says Ralph  
but I am overjoyed, long hours undammed,  
the sweet relief!  
Ralph says, "At night we leave  
our trousers and our boots in here."  
Bill asks, "What do we wear?"  
"Pyjamas, if you've got them

or your birthday suit."  
I clamp my teeth together.  
My mouth is clogged with sand.  
I am the sphinx.  
Bill now speaks my words,  
"Sir, Sergeant Smith here...  
is my wife."

Ralph sets a bunkhouse sentry,  
says the words, "We have a woman  
in the camp." A cheer vibrates the roof,  
whistles, "Me first," stamping,  
"Will she do us all?" Ralph bangs  
his tin mug, "That's enough of that,  
she's our new inmate's wife,  
and under our protection."  
Bill says: "She helped me to escape  
- bridge building - in her village."  
Pale English prisoner in my man-less world  
snatched daily glances, whispered plans  
the lazy guard deaf-drunk on spirit  
distilled from mother's plums.  
"We found a priest to marry us  
and have been walking for ten nights."  
Ten days of bliss and fear  
in haystacks, stables, barns,

adventure beyond boredest dreams.  
Rich cream turned sour over night.

Ralph coughs, "We'll need some small pyjamas."  
A wiry Scot climbs down from the bunk  
where he's lain prone. Men mutter  
as he presents striped cotton. "They're none  
too clean," he says, "I was nae expecting  
visitors." He turns, "And bye-the-bye  
I'll kill the man who messes with the lassie;  
he wouldnae be my first." They nod  
knowing about the Glasgow razor gang.  
I don't, but hug the smell-soaked, stiff  
pyjamas, rough cloak of invisibility  
and my trousseau.

Dusk roll-call whistle sounds outside the hut,  
Ralph nods, "Diversion" to the Scot  
who lines up close behind me, Bill in front.  
The guard yawns at his routine search  
wild terror pulses through my veins.  
Once times six is six. I will not faint.  
Two times six is twelve. Look him in the eye.  
Three times six is eighteen. Searching Bill,  
his hunger-skinny arms and chest.  
Four times six is twenty-four. German hands

pat my legs, hips,... Scotty calls,  
"Fat arsed German pansy. Going to lose the war.  
Like you did before." The sentry freezes.  
Joyful, derisive chorus in the line.  
"Going to lose the war, like you did before!"  
Five times six, he's gone. I could smell his breath  
beer and cigarettes and garlic sausage.  
I march now. Out into the air. Deep breaths.  
Left. Right.

In the wash room, men are singing  
"Roll me over, in the clover, roll me over  
lay me down and do it again."  
Their eyes are curious, hungry,  
tension prickles air -- suppressed desire.  
Bill stays close, Ralph and Scotty watchful.  
Men try for modesty, and I avert my eyes.  
The girl I was ten days ago still shocked  
by men's close naked bodies, smell of sweat,  
but terror-of-discovery's a giant  
whose shadow shrinks all other fear.

Bill cuts my hair. Short back and sides.  
I know it's necessary, but oh so cruel.  
I hate it, hate it, hate it. In another life  
I would throw myself on my bed and weep.

I glance in the broken mirror where they shave.  
It should make me feel safe to look so ugly,  
but I raise my eyes to Bill's and see what?  
Can love be lost with a few locks of hair?  
I run my fingers through the bristly spikes  
and will it to sprout back.

In dank latrine I pull on stained pyjamas,  
tighten the binding round my breasts.  
We file barefoot from the washroom.  
I see the thin legs of the man in front,  
pants hang off scrawny naked buttocks.  
I stare beyond the German guard,  
pass, with a panic-rush, form fists,  
and concentrate on nails piercing palms.  
A tiny stone embeds between my toes.  
I try to think of that.  
Our daily meal's thin soup and bread,  
which some devour ravenously  
but others eke out crumb by crumb  
watched by wolves.  
Before lights-out they show an apple tub  
which serves as night urinal for us all.  
Bill whispers, "I can help you, if need be,"  
judging the difficulties of its size and height.

Ralph says, "She'll take her turn to scrub it out."  
No gallant favours to expose me.  
The bunk house slowly settles till  
I tune into Bill's breathing, irregular below,  
the whole bunk rocks and creaks as he turns  
and I caress the movement;  
my new wife's body longs for his  
cold in my scratchy blanket  
my rash girl's heart cries out for home.  
I hope I won't have to wee in the night.  
When I was little and I crouched  
I always splashed my shoes.  
Red shoes. Shiny. With small bows.

At dawn we are route-marched to work.  
We quarry rock as punishment.  
Ralph says, "I've lost three stones this year,"  
weighing himself where they weigh rock.  
We seem a crowd of sickly schoolboys  
gangly, playing at prisoners, but  
for the depth of age within our eyes.  
The quarry is a bowl of noise  
shouts, trucks, explosions,  
chipping of pickaxes as great stones  
are released from cliff by sweat and muscle.  
Two men donate spare foot-rags

to wrap my hands against the shovel.  
But still the blisters raise, and burst  
and bleed and I am thirsty and my muscles  
ache, for all I tell myself I'm young and strong.  
The day is never ending and Bill's face  
pinched with self-reproach at this, my honeymoon.

At night I dream of home, and wake wet-faced.  
The note I left my mother burns my mind  
propped against the blue milk jug  
I see my pencilled writing, neat, defiant,  
the words I failed to speak: elope and love.  
I dare not see her face, but picture  
roughened hands and broken nails,  
careless letter clutched to faded apron  
my sisters fluttering to comfort,  
failing to console. I want my Mama,  
ache to stroke her hair.

This will be the shape of days and nights:  
working through exhaustion to a place beyond,  
twice daily searches, terror like a second skin.  
Watching Bill's excited movements when he talks  
of pork pies, roly poly, spotted dick  
longing to kiss his blonde eyelashes, skinny frame.  
The need for complete silence is the worst,

swallowing words like unchewed food.  
Not just the speech starvation, but a dread  
I will emit some small instinctive noise  
a cough or sneeze pitched way too high  
to be a man's, and give us all away. And  
all the while my thoughts run with the conversations  
I cannot, must not hold, until I fear they will  
burst from the prison of my lips.  
I picture my teeth wired together  
and my tongue lying leaden in my mouth  
to prevent the words escaping.

And in the quarry under guards' keen eyes,  
the men share my load, trusting  
my silence with all their secret heart.  
Ralph was at Oxford, studying classics  
and he longs for his books and friends  
"To walk all day - imagine that - no-one  
to say which way, or when to stop."  
He is the one who never mentions girls,  
except his sisters, mother and her cat.  
Scotty's accent jars and rips the words, but  
"I'm on the run," he burrs, "I killed  
my sister's bastard of a husband."  
He feared jail more than death in war.  
"I've done my time here, prisoner three years."

The overcrowded tenement or cell  
are all that wait for him. Ralph says  
before I came, Scotty lay face-to-wall  
summoning death. "Imprisonment  
and empty dreams can do that to a man."  
And dear Bill talks of railway cottages  
allotments raining feasts of plenty,  
"I'll grow our vegetables," he shines, "and never  
let you and our family go hungry."  
Strange friends these three,  
a gangster, student and a railway clerk.  
No peace-time trinity.

Each night my silent thank-you prayers  
for one more day alive with Bill, but  
echoes of the quarry are our lullaby  
ringing in my ears, the sound of sweat.  
I am re-virgined, chaste as moon  
trapped in a cube of silence  
bedded by loneliness, sleeping half a sleep.  
I wake each morning with terror  
sitting on my chest,  
a hairy beast with teeth and claws  
and evil breath. It sucks the life from me  
it whispers 'parting,' 'rape' and 'death.'  
I see Bill hears its snarling too

but grins, "Chin up!" and winks.  
I concentrate to shrink the monster,  
crushing and folding till it fits  
within a metal box and turn the key.

I watch the waxing moon and wonder  
how I can ask, what I could say,  
chalk-lipped, dust-tongued.  
Last time it was a quarter, just before  
the escape and our wedding, and now  
a new sliver of moon whispers it is near.  
What is the English word for blood?  
Do English men know of such things?  
I almost cry when shyly Bill hands me  
a neat pile of cut-up strips of rag,  
his face, half shamed, half pleased  
the first gift he has given me,  
donations from the whole bunk house.  
I bless the saints that Ralph had sisters.

Long after lights out, when the camp is still  
the crystal radio crackles out of hiding.  
A powdered milk tin, homely on the table  
has a false base, where communication  
hides. The men take turns to listen  
based on their dates of capture or their birthdays.

They offer me, politely, but I shake my head,  
fearing I wouldn't understand enough.  
The news is good, the Allies' slow advance  
should bring them to us within months.

The need to speak and to be heard  
grows, like a baby's need for milk.  
and I could wail at full lung power.  
I tell myself stories; spin them out,  
word by precious word till I can smell  
the gingerbread house and the fetid breath  
of the wolf. I am bewitched, somnambule speech  
the sleeping beauty in a spell, Snow white  
in her glass coffin. Sometimes I try  
the stories to myself in English,  
picturing eager children, blonde as Bill.  
But I don't know the words for stepmother  
or witch or woodcutter or axe.  
It could be worse, I tell myself, I am  
alive and I can scarcely dream  
how time drips past in 'solitary'  
days measured out in breathing.  
Or worse still, the rumours  
which drift like smoke from Poland.  
I concentrate on listening, to improve my English,

I memorise the words as they play cards  
"You cheat!" "Hard luck!"  
but it's too fast and I can't say, "Stop please  
what means this Mufti, twiddling, or bollocks?"  
How will it sound when I take tea with English ladies  
and speak like soldiers in a barrack room?  
When I was a girl my mother said  
I chattered like a magpie  
even in my sleep, as if I knew one day  
the words would all be stopped,  
wine corked up in a bottle.

I wonder how my voice will sound  
when I can speak again. Will it be low and masculine  
like voices circling round me every day?  
Or like my mother's harassed tone,  
"You think I like this drudgery,  
that I don't want excitement too."  
Or like sweet baritone of father's song  
before he left to join the partisans.  
For my own voice has flown,  
a small dun bird lost in the camouflage  
and this one speaking in my head  
is full of all the others I have heard,  
leaked into me, brim-full.



The older man among the guards,  
the despised Kurt, begins to follow me  
to touch my bottom as he passes by.  
Ralph says, "You aren't the first."  
My stoppered words turn waspish,  
trapped beneath an up-turned jar;  
frantic, buzzing for a chance to sting.  
Kurt watches at lights-out, but we're prepared  
and in the darkness Scotty takes my place.  
We listen as the door sighs open and his boots  
creak to the bunk. Then, crack! a well-aimed fist  
connects with face, and fingers twist his balls.  
He staggers from the hut and on parade next day  
his eye is black, and he avoids my stare.  
I have made a dangerous enemy.  
But news of allied forces breathing near  
makes guards more careful, picturing defeat.

Each month the Red Cross parcels come  
for them (and blood for me)  
and then I feel their pity. No letters  
from my home, but on my bunk I find  
small gifts, of cake and itchy socks  
which I pretend my mother made  
tokens of her forgiveness.  
Within my silent chrysalis

I long to show her how I grow  
cramped wings I'll beat against this crispid shell.

We shape our plans and when the last  
Red Cross parcels come, by strength of will  
against our salivating instincts  
we stow some food. One morning  
when we wake, the guards are gone  
afraid, like me, of Russians.  
The gates stand open and we are bemused  
watchful in case it is a trap.  
We gather up our blankets and supplies  
and pass, breath-holding, through the fence  
and off, north-east, like homing birds  
towards the green and pleasant land  
beyond burning Germany.

We trudge down past the quarry.  
Scotty spits into the silent pit.  
Ralph blesses memory of good men  
who died. Our vigilance distracted,  
we fail to see Kurt waiting,  
gun trained on us, eyes glittering revenge.  
Square fingers trace the memory of  
his bruise. Kurt cocks his gun.  
We freeze, no sound but one-another's

living breath. He advances slowly  
wants to drink my fear.

Left-handedly he fumbles at his flies  
and indicates to me to drop my trousers.  
He keeps his gun trained on my chest  
and tears spring to my eyes.  
But movement – dark shape rushes –  
a gunshot and I drop, face into mud  
not sure if I am hit – scuffles, cursing,  
I look up to see Kurt fall with Scotty.  
Ralph wrests the gun while Bill  
kneels on Kurt's back, twisting, cracking arm.

Yet when they haul Kurt up, a red  
grin has been opened in his throat  
by practised knife, as Scotty took the bullet  
meant for me. And Ralph, in madness, shoots  
into the lifeless German's face.  
Bill grabs his arm, "Stop now – the noise –  
and we might need those rounds."  
We look away as Ralph, cheeks wet,  
kisses Scotty's brow and covers up his face.

We have no tools to dig, so heap  
a cairn of stones, for which his fingers bled.

Ralph's words are dammed as mine  
so Bill says the Lord's Prayer. I take  
Ralph's arm and guide his sightless  
eyes towards tomorrow.

Four days we walk, ekeing out careful rations,  
digging turnips from the fields, hiding from guns  
of dead-eyed Aryans in retreat.  
Our breath makes clouds in crisp dark air,  
Each step one nearer longed for / alien life  
of beds and breakfasts and newspapers.  
We plod in silent-world where words  
have lost the will to flow  
stone-tongued like cooling lava.  
At night we huddle, babes in wood,  
Bill's arms around me on the frozen ground  
tight like sorrow-joy around my heart.

The rumble of more trucks announce  
troops of a different colour  
accents like the movies, unreal  
as warm beds and hot dinners.  
We approach slowly, with our hands in air.  
Bill shouts, "English, English prisoners,"  
and they advance to meet us, overfed and huge.  
Salutes and hearty handshakes and back-slaps.

Bill and Ralph give names and ranks  
and as they turn to me, fresh words ascend  
like uncaged larks, circling my head, rising to the blue.

\* \* \*

This story is dedicated to the memory of all the men imprisoned at  
Straflager E166, and of one extraordinary woman.

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